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ABSTRACT

The director of a freshman writing program must establish a position of quiet but firm power. Only if a director starts with authority, money, and intelligence, can he or she hope for lasting and beneficial change in a college writing program. The director should also have a commitment to teaching writing. Dedication to such a task requires energy, the power to cajole colleagues, and the power to establish an underlying philosophy of the purpose of writing. A part of that underlying philosophy should acknowledge writing as a way of thinking, of ordering perceptions, and of grasping control of a subject. The method of making assignments should be sequential so that students are asked to see and resee a subject in a variety of ways. A sequence of carefully framed writing assignments thus invites students to concentrate on invention, the crucial first step in the writing process and one often ignored in traditional writing textbooks. Comments on student writing must be pointed toward growth in writing rather than toward justifying a grade. Finally, the administration of a freshman writing program should not obscure the ultimate goal--the teaching of writing. (HOD)

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TOUGH TALK ON DIRECTING A FRESHMAN WRITING PROGRAM

So you're the new director of Freshman Writing. You got it by merit, or desire, or appointment, or, perhaps, default. So now what do you do in an English department filled with your literary cohorts on one side and your eager but unprepared TAs on the other? How do you muster support to teach what is undoubtedly the largest and most integral course in colleges and universities in the 1980s? I have no panacea, nor even a pep pill. I can only offer some tough talk, some administrative tips that a new--or even veteran director of freshman composition--might enact to rally aging warlords and youthful warriors to the holy cause of teaching freshman writing.

1. The Freshman Director Must Establish a Position of Quiet But Firm Power. I don't mean that you have to be a Machiavellian prince, a Francesco Sforza, running amuck in your Duchy of Milan and killing off the opposition. But, I am a firm believer in the "golden rule"--namely, 'Them that's got the gold makes the rules.' Only if a freshman director starts with authority, money, and intelligence can he or she hope for lasting and beneficial change in a college writing program. The legacy might come from the dean or the chair, but the writing director must have the leverage to badger senior faculty, to recruit TAs, and to infuse his or her own spirit into the structuring of a freshman writing program.

And that's what a writing director or administrator is: a quiet leader, an infiltrator, rather than a dictator or an autocrat. A writing director needs the endorsement and support of the senior faculty and the bucks that go with the authority. Composition teachers must be paid on a par with their literary colleagues; dollars must be made available for a writing lab if that's what the college genuinely needs; and some of the bucks should go to careful research which measures student growth in writing.

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Besides the power and the bucks, the freshman writing director must have a benign but discerning intelligence. He or she may be a budding assistant professor with a fresh PhD in composition tucked in a hip pocket or a purse, or a converted literature scholar with a commitment to teaching writing. It is the commitment to teaching writing that is important. Teaching writing is as important as teaching literature--perhaps even more important in the long run--because the writing director's commitment is truly interdisciplinary. What freshman students learn about the act of writing, they will apply in every course in the university and in the working situations of their adult life. They will write history term papers, chemistry lab reports, and they may even write up the data on a computer printout so it is intelligible to the average user of that data. While I was a participant at the NEH-University of Iowa's Institute On Writing, Carl Klaus, Director of the Institute, elaborated on writing's importance in the business world. He spoke of attending a meeting of industry representatives in Des Moines where business leader after business leader spoke about wanting a liberal arts graduate who could write a business letter for the company president's signature, a memo for employees on new personnel policies, and even a brief technical report that would satisfy the working engineers.

Business letters, memos, and technical reports are palpable demands made on our graduates and, consequently, palpable demands made on us as directors of Freshman English programs. The responsibility is challenging and wideranging; we cannot accomplish it all in one semester of teaching writing--nor in one year, or two years. Still, we can and must make writing a daily part of our students' lives in college because it will be a daily part of their lives in the university and the business world. Dedication to such a task requires us to have energy, the power to cajole colleagues, and the power to establish an underlying philosophy of what we as directors see as the purpose of writing.

2. Every Freshman Writing Program Must Have an Underlying, Pervasive Philosophy. When I was a TA at the University of Wisconsin in 1965, the Freshman Composition program included a book of essays, Vanity Fair, and What Maisie Knew. Since all of us were concentrating on advanced degrees in literature, we were comfortable discussing content and literary themes rather than writing. Our assignments to students were 'compare this and that,' or 'discuss the significance of such and such in a 500-word essay.' Our hearts were in the right place but, in retrospect, I wonder if our heads were. We had no background in the history of teaching writing except as writing (rhetoric) influenced the development of classical and romantic literature. We had little or no idea as to what constituted a good writing assignment, nor of the importance of a writing assignment in terms of the written responses we wanted from our students. We simply presumed they were as interested in literature as we were and we assigned writing on literary topics. After Wisconsin, I quickly came to realize that one didn't have to write about literature to be a writer.

Writing was, as Aristotle said, imitation, but one could just as well imitate a plumber's manual for fixing leaky drain pipes, or newspaper editorial, or a Ciceronian oration. Still, even though I believed in imitation--and to a certain extent, I still do--I depended on the textbook I used for the underlying philosphy of my course. It, too, usually preached imitation as the key to writing. I, as dutiful teacher, imitated the textbook theory of writing as I taught. The textbook mirroring Aristotle, (or Cicero, or Blair, or Whately, or Alexander Bain) became my underlying philosopy.

One year it was Sheridan Baker's funnel paragraph, the next Gallo and Rink's "I" paragraph, the next McCrimmon's paragraphs which supported a thesis that was "restricted, unified, and precise." With a class of basic students I once turned to English 3200 and concentrated on grammar; I even used Macrorie's

Telling Writing one summer when I felt liberal and unencumbered. My students did a lot of reading about writing; my assignments were short and formulaic; my students produced what I wanted them to produce: bland, five-paragraph imitations, some of which occasionally came alive, but many of which gave me what Bill Coles in The Plural I calls "themetalk" and what Richard Ohmann in English in America refers to as 'words poured into preformed molds.'

Such revelations are not meant to be confessional nor apologetic. As I look back over my 15 years of teaching, I don't think I did a disservice to my students. I do say, though, that the underlying, pervasive philosophy of the courses I taught and the program I directed was that of the textbook I used and imitated rather than my own and my students'. The rhetorical assumptions of the textbook writer became my assumptions. I was comfortable as a teacher because I could hand the students a textbook which mapped out separate lessons on analogy and analysis, and syntax and synecdoche. "Read and do likewise." "Imitate." "Add a fresh metaphor for a change!" "Put more support here in your paper." I had strings of advice, both oral and written.

What I did not ask myself in the process of all this well-intentioned advice were questions concerning the nature of expository writing. I mean deep questions such as: "Does one really know anything before one writes it?" "Is writing a way of ordering the world and one's own thinking?" "How are language acquisition and language practice related?" "Why doesn't the world of education recognize expressive writing as important?" Or, to get down to the real nitty-gritty: "Do I evaluate student writing to give it a letter grade; or, do I evaluate writing to help students grow as writers?"

Granted, most of the foregoing questions defy pat, easy answers. But, I raise them here because such questions on the nature of how and why we teach writing demand careful consideration in framing the philosphy of a writing course

for freshmen. The tone, the thrust, the philosophy should be set--at least implicitly--by the writing director. And there is no one tone, or thrust, or philosophy that works all the time, or even most of the time. Britton, Kinneavy, Lanham, Moffett, et al. offer a wealth of information about language learning and discourse theory. But the impetus for a successful and innovative program in writing is ultimately in the hands of the freshman director who shapes a program for the context--political, social, academic--in which he or she works.

To conclude my discussion of the necessity for an underlying course philosophy, I want to offer three points which have entered into my thinking for a new freshman English course. I offer them as food for thought rather than an ultimate, carefree diet.

a. Teaching Writing Is Teaching a Way of Thinking. Early on in the Institute On Writing, Professor James Van Allen (of Van Allen radiation belt fame) spoke to Institute participants on the importance of writing: "I am never so clear about my science as when I have to write it." Holding up a six-inch sheaf of drafts in one hand and a finished five-page science article in the other, Professor Van Allen added: "I find myself gathering new insights about my science as I write. I add a sentence I had not planned to write, but which I now see I need to clarify my own thinking and perceptions of my subject." In other words, writing is a way of thinking, of ordering perceptions, of grasping control of a subject as the writer goes. It is not merely transmitting preconceived ideas to paper, but a profound process of gaining new insights as the writing moves along. Hand, eye, brain coordinate in an activity of discovery. Writers come to know subjects for themselves and for their readers through writing.

Thus, during the current freshman course I and several of my colleagues are teaching, the questions we are asking are: "How do your perceptions as a writer match my perceptions as a reader of your writing?" "Is the mind of the writer

moving me along as a reader?" "Is the writing I am reading a voyage of insight and discovery rather than a ho-hum guided tour?" In other words, rather than evaluating student writing against a preformed grid of a five-paragraph theme, we are asking students to lead us along as challenged readers of their writing, their insights, their thinking.

b. Assignment-making Is the Crux of a Freshman Writing Course. How students present themselves as writers depends greatly on the kinds of assignments and challenges we present to them as writing teachers. Earlier in this essay, I alluded to the tendency many of us have to making quick assignments modelled on what students read in composition textbooks: "Analyze the chief causes of auto-pollution in Colorado," or "Describe a meaningful event in your life." A more challenging method of assignment-making--and one which is apt to result in better student writing--is a sequence of assignments in which the student is asked to see and resee a subject in a variety of ways. A case in point is Coles' The Plural I where students write 30 times on the subject of professional vs. amateur. Or Walker Gibson's Seeing and Writing where students are invited to write about a building on campus expressively, referentially, and persuasively.

The nominal subject for Coles and Gibson are, respectively, "professional vs. amateur" and "perception." The deep structure is the same for both: open invitations to grow as writers by having students write expressively about a subject (what they feel), referentially (what they see), persuasively (what they have conviction about), and even literarily (what they can do with language used imaginatively). The difference between Coles/Gibson and many other textbooks is that Coles/Gibson's assignments invite open responses in writing rather than prescribe formulaic models to follow. They give no advice on a thesis sentence or a blueprint paragraph. Instead, they expect that their sequential

assignments--worded carefully--will invite a variety of responses across the kinds of discourse.

The writing of a sequence of writing assignments--whether they be on the Alamo in Texas for students at Trinity University in San Antonio, or on work vs. play for students at Clark University in the industrial town of Worcester, MA--have a surface structure which appeals to students' backgrounds and interests. But, far more importantly, the deep structure is the same: invitations for students to grow as writers across the universe of discourse. Writing is at the heart of the freshman program, not reading about writing, not literature, not grammar.

A sequence of carefully framed writing assignments invites students to concentrate on invention, the crucial first step in the writing process and one often ignored in traditional writing textbooks. Most textbooks on the market today start by emphasizing a thesis, a paragraph, an outline. These textbooks presume a student can invent arguments, ideas, motivations. The task of the textbook, therefore, is to elaborate on arrangement and style. But, the writer must first invent before he or she can imitate.

Invention means coming to grips with one's own perceptions of the Alamo, of work, of professional vs. amateur. Invention requires thinking and exploration of one's own ideas through writing. Invention is the acquiring of a voice which leads the reader through the writing. Invention is dipping into one's own mind, sorting out impressions, and ordering those impressions through writing. Once students are willing to engage in this complex process--and it takes great risk on their part--then arrangement and style follow more naturally out of their ideas.

Students thus write for practically every class. Their writing becomes the textbook for class discussion. The writing may be letters they have written, impressions, revisions (in the sense of re-seeing) of their own writing. Just maybe,

writing so taught and involving all the aims of discourse, may produce the students Carl Klaus heard businessmen talk about in Des Moines: ones who can order a wide variety of experience through writing.

c. Commenting on Student Writing Must Be Pointed toward Growth in Writing Rather Than Serve as a Justification for a Grade. If assignment-making is writing we present to students to invite their own writing, then we should continue the dialogue in our responses to their papers. All too often (and I admit I have been a great sinner in this regard) the first thing we think is 'that's a "C" paper; bad mechanics; only an inkling of insight and support.' Consequently, the comments tend to be a justification of the grade rather than an insightful question or comment which will enable the student to see his or her writing in a new way.

Growth in writing is what we are after, not fixing evaluations on pieces of writing as irretrievable judgments. My own comments are frequently in the form of questions. The questions are meant to be constructive suggestions for revision or re-seeing such as Coles uses in The Plural I: 'I see what you are saying here, but aren't you giving me 'themetalk' instead of letting me know what you think?' Or, 'Yup, I see a writer here beginning to lead me as a reader along. Can I see more of your thought and less 'beautiful' and 'interesting' hype-talk in your next piece?'

Comments on student writing are the toughest things we do as English teachers. We are looking at their writing and probing, bolstering, chiding, and asking writers to resee their thinking and their writing. We are engaging in a dialogue in writing. This does not mean we should not give grades; grades are a part of college life. But, instead of affixing a grade to each paper, why not meet with students individually--after they have written, say, a half dozen papers--and ask them how they think they are doing as writers. In other words, when they ask us 'how am I doing, professor?' why not shift the question and continue the

dialogue: 'how do you think you're doing--as a writer leading me, as a reader, along?'

3. Administering a Freshman Writing Program is a Fact-of-life, But It Should Not Obscure the Ultimate Goal--Teaching Writing. Administering a writing course reminds me of my evening walks with my hound dog. I observe him at the end of his chain. That's me down there: smelling each bush, stopping to pee, rarely looking up to see what's around me. Even so, it's a necessary and vital existence down there in the weeds. The hound dog in me adjusts course schedules to accommodate a senior professor who wants late afternoon comp classes; I talk to a new instructor about the importance of attending the freshman workshop rather than finishing up a chapter on his dissertation this week; I parry with the sceduling people about keeping class size under 20. I love it. I win occasionally; I lose a few battles; I compromise most of the time--even after my tough talk.

But, like my hound dog, I occasionally catch the scent of a rabbit and I yank at the leash and I want to be off on what is most crucial to my instincts. My essential concerns may be down in the weeds where I keep my head a lot of the time sniffing the administrative residue of running a writing program. But, my quintessential concern is the hunt. I am a teacher of writing: fighting to put more writing in the freshman program, urging a literary mandarin to come join us even for a semester, and, most of all, trying to get my students and my instructors to admit that you only know something when you write it.

I know right now, for example, that I am going to have to do some research on the new writing program I am directing. Initially, it will be formative research. I might follow a group of students' growth in writing, not just in freshman composition, but throughout their four years here. I will probably do an attitude survey midway through the course. I might even look at some discrete units that educational psychologists and composition theorists are so fond of

measuring: cohesion analysis, T-units, embedding, etc. I do know that I have good people working with me--and expert in computer-assisted inventio and a young scholar winding up his dissertation on a comparative study of student performance across the aims of discourse. They will help me do formative and, eventually, summative research in the years to come.

I guess I am fortunate in both my current and future goals. For once, they are goals I have set based on background in the theory of composition, advice from other freshman directors and colleagues, and my own instincts and self-confidence. I hope, in other words, that my tough talk about writing will continue to lead to tough action in a writing program because I want my students to be tough talkers and writers, too. I want neither the sweet, ingratiating talk of nice vocabulary without substantive thinking. Nor do I want the stuffy bureaucratese of somnambulant obfuscation I too often see around me. Instead, I want my students to be tough talkers, tough writers. I want to see minds at work in writing which lead me along and challenge me every step of the way.

FURTHER READING

For those interested in pursuing ideas reflected in this article, the following works will prove helpful.

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